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Editor : Dr. R. D. Immanuel
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CONTENTS.

Page

1. Changing Pattern of The Nambuthiri Community of Kerala. 1
   Shri C. M Abraham.

2. The Mid India Region. 19
   Dr. H. H Presler.

3. Tirukural (A New Translation) 29
   Dr. R. D. Immanuel.

4. Book Review. 31

THE INDIA CULTURES QUARTERLY

Editor : Dr. R. D. Immanuel

Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur, M. P.

No. 19 **THIRD QUARTER 1961** **No 3**

CHANGING PATTERN OF THE NAMBUTHIRI COMMUNITY OF KERALA

A PAPER READ AT THE

Indian Sociological Conference University of Saugar, October, 1960

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The colourful or picturesque Kerala—the land of cocoanuts and the homeland of Malayalees—is situated at the South Western extremity of the Indian Sub-continent. It is the generic name for three Malayalam speaking areas—Malabar (previously a part of the Madras State) Cochin and Travancore (formerly two princely states integrated after independence on 1st July 1950, into the Union of Travancore-Cochin States). The new State of Kerala, the smallest among the re-organised states, came into existence on 1st of November 1956. This region is one of the most picturesque parts of India, rich in scenic beauty; no wonder Pandit Nehru described Kerala as the "Botanical Garden of India". Mahatmaji wrote in Young India that scenic beauty had reached its perfection in this part of the country.

The social frame work and the people of Kerala were clearly marked off from the rest of India, till recently, and have characteristic features of their own. If one examines the social organization, rural setting, marriage customs the law of inheri-

tance, religious life and festivals of the people of Kerala, no part of India contains fragments of such variety and importance as Kerala. Kerala and its people have been practically cut off from the rest of India, by Western Ghats on the East, stretching from North to South rising in places to a height of 8000 ft, Arabian Sea on the West and the Indian Ocean on the South. This region is protected on all sides, by nature's grandest handiwork and its people have not been disturbed by constant invasions as was the sad lot of various other parts of India Thus this position of isolation of the whole of Kerala, enabled the people to preserve their original culture, unmixed with all-India influence, and invests them and their institutions with certain peculiarities and distinct characteristics, which differentiate them from the people of the rest of India. Anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists and a host of foreign travellers evinced great interest in the unique and conspicuous customs of the people, especially the Nambuthiris and Nairs.

This practical isolation of Kerala and its people influenced the rigidity of the caste system in Kerala. Caste system at the height of its influence was a social institution of great complexity, and it was perhaps more highly developed and socially rigid in Kerala than anywhere else in India.[2] This region is called the home of rigid conservatism in customs and practices.[3] The isolation of the country made the high caste people withdrawn. Hence the Malayalam proverb, "Malabar is a heaven for the Brahmans and a hell for the rest." Untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability developed in Kerala. The idea of ceremonial pollution by the proximity of number of unclean castes has been developed with much elaboration. Swami Vivekananda describes the state as "a lunatic asylum of caste and communalism". It is really surprising to note that as the Indian sub-continent is narrowing down towards the south, the rigidity of the caste system increases along with the narrowness of the country.

At the apex of the traditional caste hierarchy of Kerala

were the Nambuthiris or Malayala Brahmans. They claim to be the purest of the vedic stock and faith, sacerdotal, rich,[4] and to form the socio-spritual aristocracy[5] of the land. The characteristic features of the Nambuthiri were his faith in God and resignation to His will, hospitality to strangers, scrupulous veracity, punctiliousness as regards the ordinances prescribed, and extreme gentility in manners. In regard to his anxious fidelity to truth, M. Elsie Reclus so correctly observes, "Whatever be their faults, the Nambuthiris have at least one virtue–that of perfect veracity. They answer questions put to them with great deliberation, always scrupulous to tell the exact truth in all respects" To the lower animals his attitude is one of child-like innocence; in his relations to man his guilelessness is a remarkable feature. Harshness of language is unknown to them.[6] Simplicity is the keynote of the life of the Malayalee Brahmans and learning is the passion of their life. Mr Fawcett describes them as "the truest Aryans in Southern India" and their complexion and features seem to lend some support to the tradition which assigns to them a foreign origin. Whatever their original stock has been, they have now an entirely separate caste differing from the Brahmans of other parts of India by their systematic practice of polygamy, by their rejection of infant marriage, by their restriction of marriage to the eldest son, the other brothers entering into polyandrous relations with Nair women, and by the curious custom of ceremonial fishing which forms part of their marriage ritual.[7]

Caste Hierarchy :

The whole population of Kerala, except the Christians and Muslims, was in the caste system. The various castes though segregated from one another by the practice of endogamy and occupation, were arranged in a hierarchical series. Caste system is compared to a truncated pyramid,[8] with the lowest and the least worthy caste at the base or bottom, and the higher caste in order of precedence arranged one over the other, with the highest and most sacred at the top.

At the top of the social ladder of Kerala were the Nambuthiris. They claimed to be the direct representatives of God on earth-the visible gods on earth. As the purest of the vedic stock they claim superiority over all other Brahmans. As far as possible, they tried to keep aloof from other castes and hence they had very little social intercourse with people of other castes. As a result of it, notions regarding ceremonial purity prevailed amongst them and elaborate rules of avoidance of various kinds developed with regulations of other kinds concerning the relations to one another of the different castes. "The authority of the Nambuthiri Brahmans was unquestioned. It follows as a necessary consequence that the unhappy people who diffuse an atmosphere of impurity wherever they go are forbidden to enter the high caste quarter of the village, and are compelled either to leave the road when they see a Brahman coming or to announce their own approach by a special cry like the lepers of Europe in the Middle Ages."[9]

Distance Pollution :

Social notions prevailed among the Nambuthiris about the intensity of distance pollution. Various kinds of tables of social precedence are given in various books by various writers. Sir Herbert Risley quotes the Cochin Census Report and gives the following account. "A Nair can pollute a man of a higher caste, only by touching him, people of the Kammala group including masons, blacksmiths, carpenters and workers in leather pollute at a distance of 24 feet, toddy drawers (Iluvan or Tiyan) at 36 feet; for Pulayan or Paraiyan (Pariahs) who eat beef, the range of pollution is stated to be not less than 64 feet."[10]

Rivers in his book *Social Organisation* mentions that in Malabar. the order of precedence receives a quantitative character in terms of the distance which members of various castes must keep from a Brahman. Thus a Nair may not approach within six paces of a Nambuthiri Brahman, a man of the barber caste

not within twelve paces, a carpenter or goldsmith not within twenty-four. For a Tiyan the distance is thirty-six, for a Mayayan sixty-four, and a Pulayan ninety-six paces.[11]

Some Nambuthiri Brahmans go even to the extent of believing that they should not see the members of the low castes on days when they have to be specially pure. It is said that an high caste man, for instance a Nayadi, in order to purify himself should bathe in seven streams and seven tanks and then let down a few drops of blood from a little finger.[12]

The Nairs and other castes address the Nambuthiris as Thirumeni (His Holiness) and have to behave in a particular way before them. Members of all castes except the Brahmans, were expressly forbidden to cover the upper part of their body above the waist. In the case of women also, until 1865, they were obliged by law to go with the upper part of their bodies quite bare, if they belonged to the Tiyan or other lower castes.[13] When a Nayar or a member of a lower caste goes before a Nambuthiri, he should maintain the prescribed distance from him and he could wear only a cloth upto his knees and if he was putting on a piece of cloth on his shoulder or head, he should remove it and keep it on the left hand or tie it round his waist and bend his body, drawing the shoulders inwards while standing, and cover his mouth with the right palm when speaking to the high caste man. In conversation the first person singular had to be avoided and be replaced by *Atiyan* (Slave). There was an elaborate vocabulary of flattering and 'respectful terms' which had to be adhered to by the lower castes, in conversation with the superior castes. The object of this special vocabulary of 'respectful words' was to exalt the man of the superior caste and demean the lower. The high caste people called the low caste people by their personal names Even a young Nambuthiri boy called an old Nair by his personal name.

In earlier times certain roads leading to some temples were

inaccessible to certain castes. For instance roads leading to the famous Vaikam and Guruyayur were inaccessible to the Tiyans and members of other castes. Moreover whenever a Nambuthiri was using the public high ways, members of the low castes had to get away from the path and hide somewhere.

Efforts to remove untouchability :

From time immemorial the temples and their precincts in Kerala were treated as *sankethan* grounds not open to the members of the low castes. The *Savarna* Hindus alone had the right to enter the temples and use the roads leading to the temples and they very zealously guarded their rights

The first step in the direction of removing these restrictions or bans, was made in 1898 when a mission of the Brahma Samaj was started in Calicut. The main aim of this organization was to explain to the ordinary folk its opposition to the various bans imposed on the *Avarna* Hindus. In this context, it is most interesting to note that Dr. Gopalan, the Doctor-in-charge of the Calicut Mental Hospital, took the initiative to open the branch of the Brahma Samaj at Calicut. During this time, the founder of the Depressed Class Mission, Revd. V R. Shinde, visited the Mission, at the meeting held under the President-ship of Shri C. Krishnan. Messrs. C. Krishnan, Kallinkal Madathil Rarichan Moopan, Changalathu Kunji Raman Menon, Dr. Gopalan, etc. took a lively interest in the activities of the Mission, to promote the cause of the low caste people. When the Mission was very active in the field, the Superintendent of the Zamorian's estate erected a sign board in one of the roads leading to a tank, that Tiyans were not allowed to use the road. Messrs. C. Krishnan and Manjeri Rama Aiyer, informed the Superintendent that they were going to use the road and then did so without any untoward incident. This was most probably the first occasion in Kerala that the ban was broken publicly.

Under the dynamic leadership of Shri Narayana Guru

Swamikal, the Ezhava Community which had so long submerged, had almost by a miracle awakened to its spiritual inheritance. Shri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam which he founded became the central organization of the community, which was in a large measure responsible for the political, educational, and social progress of the community. Shri Narayana Guru propagated the idea of "One Jati, One Religion, and One God" among the masses. The spread of this new idea of oneness of the people gave the incentive for the Ezhavas and the low caste people to demand the abolition of all the restrictions. Along with Shri Narayana Guru, the great poet, Kumaranasan, through his poetry gave a vivid picture of the disabilities followed by the high caste people. The teachings of Shri Narayana Guru and the writings of the great poet, Kamaranasan, prepared the ground for the entry of another leader, Shri T.K. Narayan, in the Ezhava Community. He proclaimed that allowing the Avarnas to enter the temples freely, only, will bring about radical changes in the status of the low caste people. In an interview with Mahatma Gandhi at Thirunalveli, on 8th Kanni 1107 M. E. (October 1921) Shri T. K. Madhanvan sought the advice of Gandhiji who gave his blessings and approval to the temple entry programme. "As to the right of entry into public temples for Ezhavas and others Gandhiji said that they had a perfect right to enter them and offer worship precisely on the same footing as other non-Brahman Hindus He dissented from the view that they should be prevented from entering the temples on religious grounds. Mahatmaji added that if the leaders and their followers would act with perfect self-restraint, they could enter the temples and court imprisonment if law interfered. They should not enter in masses, but only singly. The virtue lay in quiet suffering."

On January, 1924, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee adopted the removal of untouchability as one of its main responsibilities and a Committee was formed for this purpose with Shri Kellappan as the Secretary. In April, 1924, the Congress sponsored

the famous Vaikam Satyagraha, which aimed at giving free access to all the roads leading to the Vaikam temple to all the Avarnas. The Vaikam Struggle brought for the first time the question of the civil rights of the so-called depressed classes into the fore-front of Indian politics and emphasised the integral connection between the temples of Hinduism and the disabilities of the Avarna communities. The temple entry question and the great movement for social equality among the so-called untouchables may be directly traced to Mr. T.K. Madhavan's initiative in organizing the Vaikam struggle in 1924. Many Savarnas actively participated in the struggle. Mahatmaji and many Congress leaders visited Vaikam. The Satyagraha ended in partial success. The sankethan rules of the Vaikam temple were limited and the roads outside it were thrown open to all classes of people. But the agitation continued; Shri Mannathu Padbhanaman Pillay and Shri A.K. Pillay, led a jatha known as the "Savarna Hindu Jatha" from Vaikam to Trivendrum, to submit a memorial signed by 25,000 Savarna Hindus demanding the removal of bans in the use of various roads by the low caste people, to the Regent, Parvathi Ranni The Regent received the memorial and placed it before the Legislative Assembly, but it was rejected by the Assembly.

The most important event we notice next was the Guruvayur in 1931, for the right of the untouchables to enter the temple and worship there along with caste Hindus.

The famous Temple Entry Proclamation issued on 11th of November, 1936, by His Highness Shri Chithira Thirunal Maharaja of Travancore, whereby all the Hindu Temples under the control of the Maharaja and his government, were thrown open to all Hindus by birth or faith, was a measure appropriately characterised as the Spiritual Magna Carta of Travancore. This proclamation is slowly and steadily removing the obstacles to social solidarity among the different castes in Kerala. Thus the Maharaja of Travancore, has given the lead to India in a matter of the most vital importance. This Proclamation was followed by the Malabar Temple Entry Act of 1938.

The temples were the last strongholds of unreflecting orthodoxy, which once formed the pivot of all Nambuthiri's socio-religious activities. Now untouchability has been banished from temples and other public places, but a Nambuthiri may think that "his home is his castle" and there he can do anything he likes and hence he practices the same old rules in his house and in his own private temples which are in his own compounds. Even now old Nambuthiris may not allow members of the lower castes to enter their verandah and the front courtyard. If any one belonging to the Avarna group, by chance, steps into the verandah or the front courtyard, a purification ritual may be undertaken. The younger generation is becoming quite forward and they allow their friends to visit their houses and they in turn visit the homes of their friends and take tea and light refreshments with them. But the older genaration is still very orthodox and continues practising all the age-old avoidances and bans in their own homes. During my conversation with a Nambuthiri Brahman, whom I had visited at his home, he told me that some fifty years ago, they had never sent their children to schools. They were making their own arrangements in the houses and three or four families joined together to engage the services of a tutor. Now both boys and girls are sent to schools. But when they come back from schools, after sitting and mixing with children of the Avarna Hindus, they are not allowed to enter the main house directly. They have to change their clothes and put them in a special apartment near the verandah, but detached from the main house, and go and bathe and change the clothes and then only are allowed to enter the main house and take their meals. But when the younger children come home for their lunch, the elders are finding it very difficult to subject them to all these formalities. They come and straight away go to the kitchen and the dining room and demand food and if they are asked to go and bathe and come, they won't listen to it and start crying. Thus the women are compelled to give up the formalities as far as the young children are concerned. This will lead to other relaxations also.

The late fifties brought about many changes. A large section of the Avarna Hindus began to move very freely with the high caste people and to treat them as equals. The old elaborate vocabulary of respectful words which were to be used when talking to the high caste people and the mode of behaviour before them were all rejected outright by the low caste people.

Occupation of the Nambuthiris :

Most of the Nambuthiris had an interest in land. They claimed that the land of Kerala was their *Jenmam* or birth right, tracing their title to an alleged gift by Parasurama. Thus they were pre-eminently the Jenmis or landlords of Kerala - the aristocracy of the land. They also believed that Parasurama divided them into eight sub-divisions and assigned separate occupations to them, over and above their Jenmam in land. L.K. Aiyer writes, "To some Brahman families were assigned the learned professions and the privilege of making sacrifices, to others the profession of medicine, sorcery and magic, to a fourth the duty of performing pujas in temples and so on. While we had the Government of the land, others were armed to protect the country from foreign incursions and internecine quarrels."[14]. In earlier times they were the most powerful and most influential people of the land. They acted as gurus and advisers of the rajas and served as messengers during times of war. They were well-read and were considered as the sole repositories of knowledge. Their contributions to Sanskrit literature, arts, astrology, and Ayurvedic medicine are well known. The renowned Ashta Vaidyas, the Ayurvedic physicians, belong to this community. The management of most of the Hindu temples was in the hands of the Nambuthiris.

In earlier times large tracts of land were owned by private Nambuthiri Jenmis and they were free from the obligation to pay any land revenue to the state. The Government had no right of any kind on the land, not even the right to receive annual land revenue.

There was a regular code of relations as between the Jenmi, the Kanamdar, the Verumpatamdar, etc. This code of relations did of course give very wide power to the Jenmi who could interfere with the personal and domestic affairs of all his tenants. Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan first of all levied land revenue in Malabar. When the British came into power, the Nambuthiris gave up their claim to be the leaders of Kerala society and accepted the supremacy of the British in all respects. The Jenmis were still the full owners of the land that they had owned with no restrictions whatsoever in their relations with the tenants An extremely significant development that took place in the period of British rule was the transformation of the Jenmis from a real ruling class to a class of rent receivers.[15] The landlords collected their share of the produce from the tenants. The tenants had to make annual and occasional payments. During festivals and important domestic ceremonies in the house of the landlord, the tenants had to give presents and it was more or less compulsory. Thus the Jenmis were actually absentee landlords. This practice made the landlords an ease-loving class. The Jenmis had the right to evict the tenants at anytime and could demand a higher share in the produce of the land from the tenants. The landlords having no other source of income except that from the lands, were compelled to exact as much as possible from the tenants who were sometimes harassed by the landlords. The discontented tenants began to agitate. This led the government to step in and pass laws limiting the powers of the landlord. Among these the Travancore Jenmi and Kudiyan Regulation Amendment Act of 1932 is very important. The right of the Jenmi to evict the tenant was abolished and it was decided that the tenant should pay only yearly jenmikaram. The tenant was declared as the owner of the property subject only to the above liability. Similar acts were passed for Malabar and Cochin.

The Government of Kerala passed two legislations, the Jenmikaram Abolition Act (1958) and the Kerala Agrarian

Relations Bill (1959), which were intended to abolish landlordism and to promote the emergence and growth of a peasant community, with full ownership and proprietory rights over the lands held by them. The peasants were obliged to pay what is known as fair rent each year straight to the Government treasury and this liability was spread over a period of sixteen years, after which they get the certificate of purchase of land free of all encumbrance on it. Moreover the Agrarian Relations Act fixes restriction upon holding land in excess of ceiling area and disposal of excess lands.

These two acts, if enforced, will surely and certainly affect the Nambuthiri landlords. The Nambuthiris who were once the owners of the major portion of the land in Kerala will be reduced to small land owners. The absentee landlordism made them wholly dependant upon rent from the tenants. Till now they have kept aloof from all profitable professions and business, in the words of Poet Gray "away from the busy world' signoble strife." If anywhere Manu's dictum to the Brahmans, "Never serve", is strictly observed, itwas among the Nambuthiri Brahmans.

The exorbitant amount of dowry and the ruinous scale of expenditure nccessary for the disposal of girls, have brought about the ruin of many a Nambuthiri family.

The woeful want of accommodativeness to the altered conditions of present day life threatens to be the ruin of the Nambuthiris. The method of cultivation they follow is still primitive and the implements used are mostly indigenous. They seem to be skeptical of the application of modern machinery and fertilizers to agriculture. Some of them even now feel that it is below their dignity to work for themselves in the fields. Their simplicity and absence of business-like habits have made them a prey to intrigue, fraudulence, and grievous neglect, and an unencumbered and well ordered estate is a rarity among the Nambuthiri Brahmans. The economic deterioration of many a Nambuthiri family forced the male members to go in for other

occupations. Now they realize that in this age of science and technology, the study of vedas and sanskrit alone won't help them to earn a living, and they are facing keen competition from the members of other communities who have acquired modern education. So many of the Nambuthiris, who really would like to work, remain unemployed and they eke out their existence with what they get from their little plot of land.

Marriage institution and the law of inheritance :

The impartibility of family property was emphasized and rendered secure by the injunction that only the eldest son should marry (*veli*) from the same caste. The younger sons were allowed to have *samandham* or connections with Kshatriya or Nair women. The children born of such unions were considered as belonging to the mother's *taravad* and they could not be taken to the Nambuthiri's house — *illam*. The belief was that "the womb dyes the child" so the child belongs to the mother and the mother's taravad and kinship was reckoned through the female line.

The eldest son inherited the property of the father and the younger ones could only claim maintenance from the family property. The system of inheritance together with the marriage institution among the Nambuthiris, made the younger members of the family discontented and disinterested. The feeling of responsible co-operation on the part of the younger sons in the interest of the family was fast decaying. Since the younger ones and their children through Nair women had no right in the family property, they had no interest in the welfare and progress of the family.

The custom that the eldest son alone could marry from the same caste, had led to an increase in the number of unmarried Nambuthiri women and it was said that a large number of Nambuthiri women live and die unmarried in the privacy of their houses. This system in its turn encouraged the dowry system and that in its turn brought about the marriage of old men with young

women and also polygyny. This custom was also responsibe for the reduction in the Nambuthiri population. Once they formed 1/4 of the population whereas now they are reduced to a negligible percentage.

When the matriarchal system was at its zenith among the Nairs, they considered it a privilege and honour to have samandham or connections with Nambuthiri Brahmans, because the maintenance of children without the help of the father was not a problem. But due to the socio-economic conditions of the Nair taravads and the influence of western ideas and education, the Nairs are not willing to give their daughters to the Nambuthiri Brahmans.

Yogakshema Sabha :

The Nambuthiri Community which offered the strongest possible resistence to all kinds of social changes till the beginning of the present century, seeing the progress of the Nairs and the Ezhavas through the services of the Nair Service Society and the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam respectively, organised an association known as the Nambuthiri Yogakshema Sabha, to fight against all the out-worn traditions and practices. This Sabha was inaugurated on 1st March of 1908, at Alwaye in Cherumuk Vaidyan's illam, with revolutionary ideas, under the able leadership of Kuroor Unni Nampoodiripad, Kodungalloor Kunji Kutton Thampuran, Desamangalathu Valiya Narayanan Nampudiripad. But the older generation was deadly against any sort of change. They opposed the Sabha very vehemently and even threatened the leaders with ex-communication if they continued with the activities of the Sabha. So in order to pacify the old and orthodox section of the community, in the bye-laws of the Sabha it was mentioned that no one was allowed to speak nor was the Sabha allowed to pass any resolution regarding the customary practices and inter-caste relationships of the community. In the earlier period of the Sabha, there was no formal discussion on

subjects like the need for English education, education of women, marriage within the same community, division of the family property among all the sons equally, etc.

In 1916 at the Vellinazhi meeting Shri Unni Nampudiripad made an open speech on the need for English education, which opened the hearts of the Nambuthiri youths to go in for modern education. Later on a school was started under the auspices of the Yogakshema Sabha at Trichur. The persistent propaganda of the Sabha, influenced many Nambuthiris to send their children to their own school or public or private schools. But the older generation continued their opposition on the basis that English education is against their culture and that their children had to sit and mix with the children of the low caste people. Moreover they pointed out that every Nambuthiri child had to study the vedas during his *Upanayana* period i.e. between the ages of 7 and 15 and after this age, no one would like to go and study with small children in the primary schools.

Influence of the Sabha in improving the status of women in the Nambuthiri Community :

The Nambuthiri women are known as *antharjanams* which means those who always remain inside their houses. Shri E.M.S. Sankaran Nampoothiripad, the ex-chief Minister of Kerala, once remarked that the women of his community are living where there is no social contact with the outside world. They very seldom moved out of their houses and in case they went out, they were invariably accompanied by a Nair lady, and had to cover themselves with a *cadjan* or umbrella. This practice was known as keeping "*gosha*" or *purdha*. The system of polygyny and dowry system, the prohibition of widow remarriage and the practice of giving young women in marriage to old men against the wishes of the young women, all added to their woes.

The Yogakshema Sabha gave wide publicity and propaganda for the abolition of the gosha system among women and also for

widow remarriage. But till 1930, no woman was prepared to come out in the open, due to the fear of excommunication. In 1930, Mrs Manavi, created history in the life of the Nambuthiri women. She for the first time in the history of the Nambuthiri community attended a public meeting of the Nambuthiris. Following her, more and more women began to take part in outdoor activities.

In the freedom fight of the Nambuthiri women and other allied reforms of the community, dramas and writings of eminent Nambuthiris played a vital role. Two Malayalam dramas—"Rajani Rangam" and "Adukalayil Ninnu Arangatheku" (From kitchen to stage) by Shri V.T. Bhattathiripad; another drama "Marakudakullila Maha Narakam" (Hell inside the purdha) by Lalitambika Antharjanam, and the writings of Messrs V, S. Narayana Nambuthiri, K.N. Kuttan Nambudiripad, M.R. Bhattathiripad and E.M.S. Sankaran Nambudiripad, have described in their actuality the various disabilities of the Nambuthiri women and criticised the follies of their own community and argued very strongly for the of abolition the purdha system, polygyny, connections with Nair women, and the custom of old men marrying young women. They emphasised the need of modern education for both boys and girls and of keeping pace with the changing time. The newspaper *Unni Nambuthir Pathram* also played an equally important part in educating the Nambuthiri community.

Shri M R. Bhattachiripad one of the leaders of the Y. Sabha believed in the dictum, "Example is better than precept" and married a widow. Though this example did not bring about any appreciable change in the attitude of the members of the community, it certainly did create the impression among the younger generation that it was not a sin.

The younger generation realizing that the marriage institution and the law of inheritance, together with various other practices, are sounding the death knell of the whole community,

began to agitate for the marriage of the younger sons of a Nambuthiri family in the same caste and equal division of property among all the sons. The junior members began to marry from the same community, in spite of the opposition from the old people. with the full support of the Yogakshema Sabha. They appealed to the Government also. In the year 1933, an act was passed by the Madras Government, known as the Madras Nambuthiri Brahman Act XXI which enabled all the major male Nambuthiris to contract a marriage within their own community. When the junior members of the Nambuthiri community were allowed to to marry from their own caste, the Yogakshema Sabha argued that there was no necessity for the practice of polygyny. As a consequence of the efforts of the Sabha, the Cochin Nambuthiri Act XVII of 1114 M.E. was passed, which abolished polygamy. The Kerala Nambuthiri Act of 1958 provides for the family management and partition of illam properties. According to the provisions of the act, every member of an illam, whether male of female, shall have an equal proprietory interest in its properties.

Modern education and the free mixing with the members of other communities, have brought about considerable changes in their dress, ornaments, standard of living, etc. and the younger generaion is fighting against the old beliefs and practices and encouraging their fellow men to keep pace with the time.

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THE MID-INDIA-REGION

Dr. Henry H. Presler

NOTE:—This series on primitive religions in the city is continued from the previous issue. The topic is, objects believed to exert power. The author defined a charm as an object having positive and negative impersonal power; a talisman as an object having only positive impersonal power (able to effect that desired); an amulet as an object having only negative impersonal power (able to ward off that not desired); a fetish as an object having personal power by virtue of its having been entered by a spiritual being other than its own anima or soul (the primitive animist assuming that an object has a soul or a spirit of its own). The author then proceeded to show that such objects may be natural (existing in their natural state), or artificial (manufactured by man). He now proceeds with illustractions from his field work.

The goal of this article being to examine the interaction of primitive religion (the kind centering in objects exerting power) and the city, we proceed with a descriptive resume of such objects noted in our mid-India city.

Natural Objects :

The classification below follows the usual function of the object in question but in each instance its user should be consulted to obtain his classification, which might vary from the usual.

Our methodological procedure has been to survey the literature on charms, talismans, amulets, and fetishes in India, and on the basis of common interpretations among the writers, distinguish those local objects supposed to be cases in point. But whether city users consider them only in this light is a question to be answered in the next section. For example, most writers think that hand prints are charms in rural areas among primitive folk. Their root concept, their **Ur Begriff,** may be such; but the city has added another definition of them without dropping the old definition.

Natural objects which are **charms** in our mid-India city are not numerous. Hand prints on sacred precincts, made by dipping the hand in sindhur, are exceptions frequently seen. Possibly rock crystal should usually be classified as a charm.

Talismans (natural objects) include relics of dead saints, beneficial medicinal substances like herbs (which are not understood chemically or biologically but as talismans), portions of offerings and dedicated things, later distributed to devotees as **prasad** (the belief being that things offered to gods become infiltrated with power), tulsi leaves in hot water (sometimes interpreted by users as power-dispensing liquid), tulsi leaves in cold water (an aid to the soul's departure towards a beneficial after-life in the case of the dying), **pad amrit** (food nectar, being the washings from the feet of holy men), the water used to bathe idols, water from sacred rivers and springs. Such natural objects have positive impersonal power.

Amulets are the most frequent natural objects warding off evil by their impersonal power. Mid-India religions are negative in character, i.e. religion is not practiced for the good derived, but for the trouble and misfortune to be neutralized or avoided. Among such amulets (the reader should dispense with the notion that an amulet is always worn), are parts of animals : cowdung smeared to ward off evil spirits, blood sprinkled for the same purpose, cowrie shells **(Cyproea moneta)** hung on the necks of cattle and supposed to crack if the evil eye fall on them, and the ever-present conch shell (especially those with whorls to the right). I was told by a well-educated (both Eastern and Western education) Brahmin :—

> The are two kinds of ***shankhs*** (conch shell), one with whorls to the right, and one with whorls to the left. The left hand type is ordinary, but has power. By blowing the left hand type, demons for forty yards in every direction are kept at bay. If you blow this shankh in daily puja, morning and evening, you may be sure of safety from demons. The one with the right

hand whorls is very rare and very powerful. Is gives wealth and prosperity in the house where it is. The Raja of Z-, for instance, has one.

Other amulets include plants: huldi (a yellow porridge made from a root and smeared on the body), ashes smeared on the body (to control the demons over which Shiva rules, the connection being that Shiva likes to reside in the burning ghat or cremation grounds, and on one occasion he burned up the universe including the demons who were reduced to ashes; any ashes remind and frighten them away).

Other amulets include noises: blowing the conch shell scares evil spirits from the temple offering, from a married pair, and from a corpse. Abuse and indecent behavior scares evil spirits. Cracking and thumping the fingers does likewise.

Colors are amulets in some cases; namely, yellow, red, and black. **Sindhur** (vermillion on idols), and **Kajal** (lampblack in the eye sockets), are protective powers.

Lights and fire are possessed of negative impersonal power. Hence. an **arthi** (literally waving) lamp with several wicks is waved around idols to frighten away evil spirits. People are given the chance to touch their hands to the arthi fire for the same purpose,

Fetishes as natural objects require exact definition. If defined as objects containing spirits, they might better be subsumed under the concept of animism. But as I have defined them (objects containing extra spirits other than their own spirits), they remain distinct. Three examples have come to my attention. First, there are the beads whose value depends partly upon the substance of which they are composed, and partly on their being perforated and thus exposed to the entry of spirits. Saivites wear **rudraksha**, a berry of the plant **Eleocarpus ganitrus;** Vaisnavas wear beads carved from the sacred basil **(tulasi)**,

both necklaces (**mala**) bringing the wearer under the protection of the deity. Second, dirt is carried from place to place in order to transfer a second party divinity; the first party divinity is Dhurtimata, known to inhabit earth; the second party divinity is some local god or goddess, usually. The third example of a fetish among natural objects is the body of an ecstatic, who claims that during its occupancy by an exterior spirit, his own anima is in a condition of unawareness. His body becomes the vehicle of the second party spirit only; on the departure of that visitor from his body, his own anima takes control and becomes aware, but has no knowledge of what the body did during the ecstatic period. The body, being in a state of nature, was a "natural" thing which, by virtue of its having been possessed by a spirit other than its own, was for that period, a fetish. During that period it became an object exerting personal power, mainly positive (although I have seen the power exerted negatively also), and devotees tried to come under the influence of that power in order to be healed, encouraged, instructed and so forth. Here, again, it is instructive to note that the same phenomenon may be defined by the believer in more than one way. When focusing on spiritual immediacy he may define the ecstatic as a medium; but when wanting to be healed, he focuses on the ecstatic's body temporarily exerting healing power; in other words, he now views the ecstatic's body as a fetish.

Such are the natural objects exerting power as found in this mid-India city. This brings us to artificial objects of the same character.

Artificial objects :

Artificial **charms** are illustrated by the ever recurring **tawiz,** worn as a locket on a cord around the neck, or on the arm. It is very important; perhaps 50% of our city dwellers wear one.

Sacred verses and mantras are often found inside the tawiz, but may exist separately. Sometimes the stuff on which they are

written is soaked in water until the ink dissolves, and then the solution is drunk. These writings are charms, with positive and negative impersonal power.

Other charms include the diagram. The most famous of these are the swastika, the Sanskrit symbol for the syllable OM, and the **yantra** drawn usually on the ground with wheat or rice flour. Yantras appear mainly at festivals, but the other diagrams are painted on walls for year-around protection.

Talismans artificially made and exerting positive impersonal power, include those in the Cult of the Dead. Bricks or stones brought from sacred graves emanate power, especially on the saint's death anniversary. Mementos like the sandals of the departed holy man, his spiked shoes or other means of self-mortification, are talismans in some places.

Other artificial talismans are representations of heavenly bodies especially the **nal** or crescent moon. The nal is credited with extraordinary powers; in some cases it disappears during the slack period between festivals, but on the holy day reappears by flying through the air, or coming up from the bottom of wells.

Corbels on sacred buildings are frequently fashioned in the form of birds which some suthorities think represent talismans.

The **rakhi** talisman is a colored thread tied around the wrist of a brother by his sister, at Raksha Bandhan festival, and has the power to secure his love and protection of her.

Artificial **amulets** are even more frequent. Iron nails driven into trees "locate"—fix at that spot—a troublesome demon.

Ornaments with affinities to amulets are legion. Necklets, girdles, bracelets, anklets, pendants are said to have their roots in amulets. Some are worn, others are carried in bags or pockets, sewn into the clothing, or attached to machines and vehicles.

Encircling strings, threads, and rings may be seen on trees and persons. It is claimed that jewels are originally amulets to guard the orifices and other parts of the body exposed to the entrance of demons : ears, nose, temples, neck, hands, feet, waist, pudenda. The sacred thread of a twice-born casteman is tied annually on Raksha Bandhan and is claimed to have been originally an amulet.

Artificial amulets include the vessels of clay exhibited in fields to counteract the evil eye.

Certain metals area mulets, mainly iron, of which evil spirits are afraid. Many iron implements and symbols occur at sacred sites in the city for the purpose of frightening them away. Coins placed at temples are not always fiscal offerings; they may be amulets, and the best are of iron, lowest in fiscal value but highest in amulet power. This helps to explain why people give "so little" fiscally; the higher coins of silver are not so efficacious against demons, and currency notes of paper are ineffective against them. It also explains why people throw coins of low denomination into sacred sites having no paid functionaries; their function is not to pay a salary but to frighten demons away. It explains why the donor does not care who picks up the coins later, whether a child or a thief; the act of casting the iron coin into the vicinity of the idol, relieved the god of the swarm of invisible imps tormenting him, by frightening them away. The coin did its work, and who picks it up subsequently is of no importance to the donor.

Certain three dimensional symbols are said by some writers to be amulets, notably phallic symbols. There are thousands such in this city.

Artificial noise makers serve as amulets to scare evil spirits, according to the literature, and include bell ringing, drum beating, and music. Spoken mantras act similarly.

Another very frequent amulet is the bandhna liquid, a concoction whose recipe does not here concern us. The liquid is

poured over every inch of a boundry line, around a mohulla of the city, or more frequently around a village. This liquid acts for a full year as an amulet to keep out demons and disease-causing imps.

Certain acts are themselves amulets, such as removing the clothing at midnight and performing a ritual in the nude. The very act has power to drive off demons.

Artificial fetishes are rare in this mid-India city.

This ends the list of observed artificial objects in use in an urban context, which objects are believed to exert power. The reader now has read through a list of both natural and artificial examples of the topic before us.

PART III

We are now in sight of our goal; an estimate of the interaction of this kind of primitive religion (the charm, talisman, amulet, fetish complex) with urbanism. To proceed further :

1. A well-worn theme is to the point that urbanism destroys primitive religion and produces secularism. If this series on primitive religion in the city be reviewed, the reader would become open to the proposal that such destruction is not occuring in mid-India to any great extent, if at all. The evidences supplied by other writers elsewhere have been so convincing that one hestitates to question them. Yet, the quantity of primitive religion in this city and its flourishing condition, objects exerting power being a case in point, requires explanation. It may be that Hindi-town and its 300,000 inhabitants has been to date nothing more than a collection of villages enclosed in some political boundaries; this means that the urban process may not have gone far enough to weaken primitive religion. Another possibility is that primitive religion has been weakened here, but the arc of our observations is not long enough to enable us to perceive it. (We began systematic observations in this town

in 1949). Or, the lack of a base line from which changes could be measured might obscure our estimates; we are in the process of recording in cartography, photography, and written descriptions the actual situation in time, so that subsequent differences may be noted. Again, just how much weight to give to general all-India descriptions of primitive religions, or to North or South India descriptions, or even to provincial descriptions, is a question. How can one assume that every instance of primitive religion in any other part of the country (as reported in the literature) must be found in our city, and if not, that belief in objects exerting power has been weakened by urbanism ?

The urban-rural gradient, another well-worn measuring device, does not support the view that urbanism is sapping the strength of the charm here. Rather, the villages in our rural hinterland seem to have relatively fewer objects exerting power than our city. It may be that talismans and amulets and fetishes come to the city and are multiplied by their prestige in a dense population. The city may increase the density of amulets through social contagion, hawkers, and the need to overcome the special uncertainties of urban life. I will conclude this paragraph by insisting that the proposition (that urbanism destroys primitive religion) is not proven in mid-India.

2. Neither is it proven that education per se destroys belief in charms. Informal education (not in schools) in mid-India rather encourages their use. Our cultures accept the talisman, and urbanism has little effect on the cultural axiom. Orthodox Sanskrit education based on such books as the Atharva Veda, staunchly maintains the amulet. Persons with both Eastern and Western education are undisturbed in their use of amulets. But Indians who have only Western education and that beyond High School, tend to shy away from fetishes. It is the kind of education - Western history, science, and materialism - and not education itself that ruins belief in charms. It is that kind of education and not urbanism, that wrecks the complex.

Pragmatism supports their belief in charms. As a matter of fact, believers in the efficacy of charms are empirically–minded. They believe in charms because they tried them and they appeared to "work". A man puts a talisman on his arm; the next day events are favourable; he concludes that the talisman exerted beneficial power on his behalf. He has no philosophy about it, no reasoned defence of it. Whereas he was weary and heavy laden, now he is restored and liberated; such is his argument. Frazier might discourse on magic, Tylor might inveigh against logical errors, Marret might propound his theory of **mana;** our people know nothing of such opinions Neither is there any such sequence as the following; "If a small stone of remarkable shape catches a man's attention, he carries it away with him, and it is likely to become an amulet; whereas, if it is large, he will more probably observe it whenever he passes, invent a myth to account for its preculiarities, and perhaps set up a habit of visits and offerings." I do not know whether the writer of such opinions ever lived among primitives, and if so, where they were. As for our city there are no men picking up pretty stones which "likely" become amulets; our people are not "inventing myths" to convice themselves that these pretty stones have power in them. Neither are they wearing charms because their mothers told them to do so. Their minds work normally and naturally and follow much the same processes of reasoning as our own. The mid–Indian wants to find out about his lost brother; he goes to a talisman maker and states his need; the latter makes him an object and indicates how to use it; that night he has a dream in which his brother communicates information; he concludes "there must be something in it". He begins to tell his experience, and others repeat it until the story is generally known. An anthropologist hears the story and calls it a myth, but he dare not say our people invented that myth. That myth is a success story after the event, and not a fabrication to defend an object. At least, that is how it is here in mid–India.

I am trying to make the point that urbanism is not having

any deleterious influence on this manner of thinking, here. Neither is education **per se**. But a Western curriculum substitutes a different set of assumptions and develops a critical attitude, which may make the charm-talisman-amulet-fetish complex untenable.

3. The third point is to the effect that urbanism does tend to substitute artificial for natural objects believed to exert power. Quantitatively there are many more manufactured objects considered to be powerful. Urbanites tend to prefer a well-got-up tawiz to a chunk of rock crystal. The city's stress on literacy seems to put illiterates in the way to give considerable credence to amulets containing written verses. Drawings, diagrams, labyrinths enjoy preference over objects in a state of nature. The strength of the foundry has given popularity, so it appears, to iron as an amulet. Spun threads and strings are prefered to blood. The very artificiality of city life may be conducive to artificial charms. Whatever the reason, the city, while not weakening belief in or use of objects exerting power, may bring it about that the city-dweller chooses an artificial rather than a natural object to protect him.

4. Again, the city promotes double interpretations of amulets. Take blood, for example. A primitive mentality in the city may claim that blood scares away demons and also maintain that blood is an offering to a goddess. Hand prints may be defined as frightening away demons, but also as testimonials of having been helped by a god. Medicinal substances like herbs may be considered powerful, and also as antidotes. Arthi may be difined as the waving of lights to frighten spirits, and also as an act of deference to a god. In some cases the primitive interpretation is forgotten and the second maintained. For example, I have not heard one of my thousands of informants state that a phallic symbol scares away demons. They say rather that it represents such a god, or the power of divine creation. This may be a step towards the destruction of belief in arthi as a charm; but the

charm-concept will be materialized in the locket around the man's neck. This means that one charm has been substitued for another, nothing more.

In other words, I suspect that urbanism in the mid-India region is not destructive to belief in objects exerting power, and may even encourage that belief, but in the form of artificial rather than natural objects. The root-idea remains and flourishes; its symbol may be artificial in the artificiality of the city.

The view that urbanism destroys primitive religion is, at least here, too decisive, too sweeping, too sudden, and quite unproven. Instead of leaping to such a radical conclusion, we might better give ourselves to the fascinating study of the involutions and protrusions and shifts within the entire complex in the city.

Tirukural (*dated about 400 A.D.*)

Chapter 61

The Virtue of not Being Idle

1 The constantly burning lamp of existing is dimmed (or put out) by the darkness of idleness.

2 He who wants life to be Life must play idle to idleness (that is he must give up all idleness.)

3 The family of the idler will perish before he dies.

4 Accusations will multiply and disrepute accrue unto him who has fallen into the pit of idleness.

5 Those that perish, choose willingly for their sailing, boats of procrastination, forgetfulness, indolence, and abundant sleep.

6 Even the wealth of a monarch cannot benefit a lazy fellow.

7 Those who do not make efforts have to bear harsh criticism.

8 Even if well placed the slothful man will become the servant of his enemies.

9 The social stigma (i.e , that he is an idle fellow) will be blotted out when the lazy man gives up his laziness.

10 The diligent king in due time will get all the domain measured by the feet of Vishnu.

(The reference is here to the story of the god Vishnu who in order to save the world from a wicked king came in the form of a Brahman begging for the grant of three feet of land. When the beggar was granted his request it was found that he was not a beggar at all and that the whole universe was less than three feet measured by his foot.)

Chapter 62
The Virtue of Diligence

1 Never lose heart thinking it is too difficult. Diligence will bear fruit.

2 The world forsakes the man who forsakes diligence.

3 The glory of helping others rests on the foundation of diligence.

4 The sluggard who wishes to help others and the coward who longs to wield a sword are alike.

5 He who foregoes his pleasure to help others is a veritable pillar to his kinsmen.

6 Diligence brings wealth; laziness breeds poverty.

7 The black demoness of want resides with the sluggard, while the goddess of prosperity abides with the diligent man.

8 No stigma is attached to a man's adverse circumstances; the real stigma is his lack of diligence.

9 No efforts of man are in vain though they might not produce the desired effects.

10 He who keeps on persevering will one day overcome even fate.

Book Review

Chandradhar Sharma : **A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy**

(London: Rider & Co. 1960) pp 415 price 30 s

Here is a very readable handy volume on the abstruse subject of Indian Philosophy. The author is to be congratulated for the lucid way in which he describes some of the difficult conceptions and theories of the great seers and mystics of India. He has tried to take the reader as often as possible to the original writings and this constitutes one of the great merits of this volume. Mathematical precision and careful analysis seem to characterise the book as a whole especially with reference to objective facts. As such the book is authoritative. Whenever there are arguments he carefully numbers and marshalls his reasons one by one. Such point by point statements are of great help not only to students who are cramming for examination at the last minute, but also to the laymen and the beginner who want to read the book as a whole rapidly, and then glance through the volume for recapitulation.

One of the most serious flaws of books written on this subject by many authors is that they are prejudiced, and very often their points of criticism seem to be coloured, distorted, and exaggerated. The author in his preface says: "My main aim in this work is to give a clear, comprehensive, and critical account of the various systems of Indian philosophy. ....Honest difference of opinion in interpretation is legitimate, but it does not entitle us to impose our own preconceived notions on a system which are repelled by its original texts." That he has tried to follow this ideal no one can deny, and as such this constitutes a praiseworthy element of this volume. However as one reads the book, one wonders whether the author is not prejudiced in favour of Shankara or at least that type of monism refined and polished by twentieth century Western thought. Probably, on account of

this, in his criticisms, non-monistic schools (Ramanuja in particular) seem to get a more severe thrashing than they deserve. Thus in a two page criticism of Ramanuja (368 ff.) the following phrases occur :— "most unsatisfactory," "unable to solve the problem," "his is a pseudo concept," "this is grave inconsistency," "the difference which makes no difference is no difference," "runs with the hare and hunts with the hound," "monadology is a figment of the imagination," "the difficulty is not solved," "one can not keep half a hen for cooking and the other half for laying eggs," "it is as absurd as the Samkhya saying—," "he can not explain," "carries no conviction," etc. When he is not quite so severe, he kindly suggests that conversion to the Vedant of Shankara is the proper thing to do. For instance in page 168 he says that "Sankhya, therefore should let its Prakrtti glide into Avidya, the inseparable power of the Purusa; its Prakrti-parinama-vada into Purusa-vivarta-vada; its so called empirical Purusa into phenomenal Jiva; its negative Kaivalya into positively blissful Moksa;....." A realist might say that to the author the philosophy of Shankara provides a procrustean bed to chop off any element that does not fit in with monistic idealism. His central idea is that throughout the centuries there has been one steady stream of Indian thought, viz., monistic idealism and that the key note of the Vedic hymns is the same. So he says that those who say that the thought of the Vedas marches from anthropomorphic polytheism to henotheism and monotheism are like people who trace the foot prints of a bird in the air as it flies. (p. 16).

To say this is not to minimise the value of the book. The author writes with conviction as a monistic idealistic Vedantist. He is the head of the department of philosophy in Jabalpur University and has to his credit seven major books. May he write many more books.

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